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ABSTRACT

The creation of a National Commission for the Social Studies offers an extraordinary opportunity to reconsider the mission of social studies education and move in new directions. Defining what the social studies field should be will help to answer the question of what should be taught. Questions of what children can learn in the elementary school years and what they need to know in order to form a sound foundation need to be addressed. A suggested sequence for grades seven through twelve might include: (1) grade 7 (geography); (2) grades 8, 9, and 10 (U.S. history and world history studied over a three-year period but with flexible scheduling of class meetings); (3) grade 11 (U.S. government and economics); and (4) grade 12 (U.S. problems and electives). More time and materials are needed by teachers in order to prepare and implement better instructional strategies. Other issues that also need to be confronted by the Commission include: (1) teacher education; (2) the responsibility of academic disciplines in explicating themes, topics, concepts, and generalization of their disciplines; and (3) providing students with opportunities to apply knowledge to "real life" experiences within the school and community. (SM)

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THE REFORM OF SOCIAL STUDIES AND THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES

by

Howard D. Mehlinger

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The Reform of Social Studies and the Role of the National Commission for the Social Studies*

Howard D. Mehlinger

In 1981, a co-editor of the yearbook on The Social Studies, published by the National Society for the Study of Education, stated that the social studies appeared "to be suffering from a terminal illness." While segments were thriving, the field as a whole was somehow less than the sum of its parts. Indeed, he wondered whether social studies as a curricular area may actually have died sometime in the past but people were too busy to notice; perhaps only the appearance of life was being maintained by various life support systems provided by special interests.** He called for the creation of a National Commission on the Social Studies to analyze the problems confronting the social studies and to offer recommendations for its renewal.

Six years later, we have a National Commission for the Social Studies. It held its first formal meeting only six weeks ago. Fay Metcalf, the chairman of our session today, is its Executive Director. In my opinion, the National Commission for the Social Studies offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to

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**Some readers were angered by the metaphor and judged the analysis to be extreme. What would such persons think now of those critics who no longer wish even to use the term "social studies?" The term is so discredited in the eyes of some that they prefer to bury and forget it.

correct many of the ills besetting the social studies field. It is not that all of the problems affecting social studies can be resolved by a national commission; however, certain critical issues can best be resolved in this way and are unlikely to be resolved in any other way. It is also a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity because like Halley's comet, national commissions on the social studies may appear only once every 70 years or so; I was not living in 1916 during the last one and don't expect to live until the next one. If the current national commission has an impact approaching that of the 1916 NEA Commission on the Social Studies, it must be taken seriously.

We should understand what the National Commission for the Social Studies can and cannot do. It cannot directly teach a child, prepare a teacher, write a textbook, or conduct historical research. Indirectly, it can influence all of the above. A national commission is like a basketball rules committee. By determining the height of the basket, the distance from which three points are allowed for a goal, the length of time a player can remain in the free throw lane as well as the width of the lane, the time a team can hold the ball before a shot is taken, the number of personal fouls each player is permitted and so on, the rules committee largely decides who will play, how the game will be played, and which team will win.

The social studies "game" is still being played by the rules set by the 1916 Commission on the Social Studies. The "rules" may or may not be strictly enforced, but we teach American history at grades 5, 8,

and 11 because the 1916 Commission judged it desirable to do so. Over time, the Commission's proposals acquired the status of legislative mandates or state department of education regulations; teachers were prepared so that they could teach the prescribed curricula; new textbooks were written to respond to the new courses. Some of these textbooks have endured to this very day.*

It is true that efforts by various social studies reformers have had some impact on the curriculum since 1916. Elective courses have been added; these courses attract a few students. It is also true that the content of courses proposed in 1916 have altered somewhat: "European history" became "world history" and more recently "global history" in some schools, but a one-year survey course at the tenth grade is firmly entrenched however its content may have been patched.

The last major effort to overthrow the existing curriculum occurred nearly three decades ago under the banner of the "new social studies." Even then, most of the reformers sought mainly to pour "new wine into old bottles": American government became "American Political Behavior," for example. But when the Educational Development Center sought to substitute anthropology for American history at grade five, the public and the education profession

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*Magruder's American Government was first published in 1919 to respond to the 1916 recommendation for a course in American government. Magruder died decades ago, but his book survives and remains the leading seller among American government textbooks, despite many fruitless efforts to dislodge it.

rejected "Man: A Course of Study"; it did not conform to the 1916 curriculum.

Choices about school curricula are affected by at least three factors: judgments about the needs of children and youth, judgments about the needs of society, and judgments about the status of approved knowledge (largely the academic disciplines) from which information to be taught students is selected. In 1916, the Commission on the Social Studies looked at a world in which public school enrollment was growing rapidly, although the majority of most students quit after elementary school; about 13% of 17-year-old youth completed high school; the nation's population was also growing rapidly; large proportions of the new immigrants were poor, uneducated, naive about democratic institutions, and unable to speak English; the United States was experiencing rapid industrialization and urbanization; nationalism, militarism and competition among world powers occupied the attention of American political leaders. Given these conditions, is it surprising that the socialization of youth to become loyal Americans, responsible citizens, and capable workers were thought to be the overriding "need" of youth and served the needs of society in 1916? Unlike prior groups such as the AHA Committee of Eight for whom college preparation seemed most important, "education for responsible citizenship" became the guiding rationale for the portion of the curriculum now labeled the social studies.

"Citizenship education" has continued to be the principal justification for social studies. Nor need we be surprised that in 1916 history and geography were the disciplines judged to be the primary sources of knowledge for the social studies. Political science, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and economics were only beginning to establish themselves as independent fields of academic study. Indeed, the social and behavioral sciences did not flourish until after World War II.

It is not that the 1916 Commission on the Social Studies made stupid choices for its time. It is merely stupid that we let good choices made for a time that no longer exists guide our curricular choices for a radically different present. And how are our times different from those in 1916? The briefest answer is: in practically every way imaginable but here are a few examples:

-- A high school education is now considered a basic education for everyone; approximately 50% of all high school graduates acquire some post-secondary experience;

-- The mass media has a far greater impact on American culture now; school is only one of several sources of information and values for youth.

-- The United States has become a major cultural, economic, political, and military actor on the world stage;

-- Basic institutions -- the family, church, government, schools, and corporations -- and the roles performed by individuals and groups

within each of the these institutions -- have changed dramatically since 1916.

The list could be greatly extended, but it is unnecessary to do so. It is obvious that the society in which we live today is not the same society people experienced in 1916. The needs of society and the needs of youth today are vastly different from that known in 1916; and the sources of knowledge from which we select appropriate social studies content have increased many times.

The opportunity afforded to the newly-established National Commission for the Social Studies is that it can speak authoritatively for the present. It can propose appropriate purposes for social studies today; it can assert what should be taught, when it should be taught, and how it should be taught. No other group has the same opportunity or equal credibility. Professional associations are viewed (appropriately so in my view) as primarily lobbyists for their own disciplinary perspectives and academic turf.* State departments of education can tinker with the scope and sequence, but textbooks are produced mainly for a national market; teachers are educated for a national curriculum; and students move from place to place, expecting

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*This is even true for the National Council for the Social Studies, regardless of how it pains me to state it. Unfortunately, the schism between the leadership of NCSS and the leaders of other academic/professional associations has grown so wide that NCSS is seen as largely representing the views of social reformers and pedagogical specialists within social studies.

to find essentially the same courses of study wherever they land. Proclamations by federal bureaucrats remain little more than proclamations; they are resisted locally for both Constitutional and partisan reasons. Thus, there is no other group that has authority to speak for the social studies field; only the Commission, a temporary, non-partisan group that exists for only one purpose and then disbands when its job is done, has the clout to establish the outline for a new social studies curriculum.

The fact that the Commission can play a valuable role does not ensure that it will do so.* First of all, some will resist the Commission's recommendations; a few oppose the very fact of a Commission. Such people may believe that authoritative conclusions by the Commission will hamper the field, stifling initiative and creativity by classroom teachers. They note that the 1916 Commission constrained creativity in the social studies for over 70 years; they wonder whether we need another similar experience. To them weakness and anarchy are preferable. Others dislike the present situation but dread the Commission will produce abhorrent recommendations, ones that may retard the field and prove difficult to overcome. They would not resist strong recommendations provided that they are compatible to their own beliefs and values.

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*Several study commissions followed the 1916 Commission but had little impact. It might be important to study why they failed.

It's somewhat premature to judge what the Commission will conclude, but it is not too early to identify the areas that must concern Commission members and to start a dialogue within and outside of the Commission that makes certain the Commission attends to the main issues that are crippling the field. Here are some of the questions that should confront the Commission:

Why should the schools teach social studies?

The Commission cannot ignore this question, and the answer is not self-evident. If we assume that nearly all students will graduate from high school, should all students be expected to study social studies? If so, is the purpose of social studies to prepare youth for post-secondary schooling, for employment, for citizenship, for family membership, for all of them? Should the same social studies program be required of (or offered to) all students regardless of academic ability, career aspiration, sex, social class, and minority status? To what degree is the purpose of social studies to socialize youth into accepting uncritically existing institutions, rules, and practices; to what degree is the purpose of social studies to prepare youth to be reflective critics of society? To pose the question in another way: To what extent does American society need patriots; to what extent are social reformers more valuable?

What role should the academic disciplines play in structuring the social studies and which academic disciplines offer the greatest advantages? Should the academic disciplines be studied for their own sake -- i.e., for their own implicit value -- or for the "useful knowledge" they provide? If the latter,

how does one determine what knowledge is most "useful?" There is considerable current interest in the concept of "literacy" -- as in historical literacy and geographic literacy. Twenty-five years ago it was deemed important for students to know the "structure of the academic disciplines," their "modes of inquiry," and key concepts and generalizations. What kind of knowledge is of greatest value and which aspects will be most likely retained?

What should social studies offer as a discrete area of academic study apart from other sources of information, knowledge, values, and skills that concern the human experience? The mass media provide more accurate and up-to-date coverage of current events; the family and peer group have greater influence on values; social organizations and work settings provide direct experience in working cooperatively with others in leadership. What should a social studies program contribute that others cannot?

These are some of the questions about purpose that will affect decisions by the National Commission. At the present time there is no single purpose for social studies that enjoys wide support. Because people hold different notions of why social studies exists, they have different solutions for how the various purposes can best be promoted. We cannot know whether the social studies field is improving until we decide what we think it should be.

What should we teach?

The answer to the question -- what should we teach -- naturally follows from the answers we give to the prior questions relating to purpose. In 1916 the view was that all children should be thoroughly socialized as Americans. The solution was to teach American history three times, at grades 5, 8, and 11. Civics and American government were to be taught twice at grades 9 and 12; European history was to be taught twice at grades 7 and 10, mainly to emphasize the "old world backgrounds" to American civilization. The result is a curriculum package aimed at teaching youth to become loyal, law-abiding, and occasionally participating American citizens.

These remain worthy goals, but should they be the only goals for the social studies today? For example, is it important that students be taught to be wise consumers? If so, what do they need to be taught in social studies? Firms spend millions of dollars on advertising to encourage people to buy particular products. Do the schools have a responsibility to prepare youth so that they can cut through marketing gimmicks in order to make wise consumer choices? If so, what kinds of courses are needed -- micro and macro economics, consumer economics, economic history?

Certain topics are rarely included in the social studies because they are judged to be too controversial, or if they are included, they are presented in such a way as to promote fear and vigilance. For example, Marxism/Leninism is rarely if ever treated as a topic for serious philosophical or historical inquiry, despite the fact that Marxist/Leninist

beliefs are accepted by millions of people throughout the world and ignoring the fact that many of Marxism's central premises underlie assumptions Americans routinely make about the behavior of people and institutions. To what extent can topics formerly judged to be taboo be accepted now for serious study in schools?

What should be the role of survey courses? In 1916 it was deemed useful to teach a survey course in American history three times because the majority of students would not continue their schooling beyond the fifth grade. Those who completed eight grades could profit from a repetition; only a small number would study American history in high school. Today, nearly every student is treated to an American history survey three times.

We need no longer assume that few students will graduate from high school. Now, we have 12 years (13 if kindergarten is included) of time for teaching social studies. Perhaps American history need no longer be studied as three distinct courses, separated by three years each. Maybe it would be better to study American history for three years in a sequence; in this way only a third of the survey would need to be presented in any single year. World history presents even greater problems for a one-year survey. Is it necessary to limit world history to a one-year, tenth-grade survey? If social studies were required every year during 12 years of schooling, it should be possible to eliminate one-year survey courses in American and world history.

Even if the one-year survey course were to be abolished, the dilemma of depth vs. coverage must be faced. Is it better to treat a great many topics superficially as is now the custom, or is it better to focus on a few topics in order to gain greater understanding and appreciation of a few ideas. The Commission can contribute to the debate of depth vs. coverage. Teachers now feel pressed to cover vast amounts of material because the topics are included in their textbooks and because standardized tests tend to reward those who recognize many, specific, isolated facts. The Commission can take a position on depth vs. coverage, even suggesting topics that deserve special attention.

In addition to offering recommendations regarding the knowledge to be included in a K-12 social studies curriculum, the Commission must take a stand on the role of values and the skills that should be taught in the social studies. Recommendations regarding the role of values instruction cannot be avoided; the topic perplexes teachers, divides communities, and paralyzes publishers. Furthermore, while every social studies program routinely lists the skills to be taught, frequently, instruction in skills seems to be ignored once the skills are listed. Careful attention must be given to skills instruction.

When should social studies be taught?

This question has many facets. At one level, we can answer: Every year from grades K-12. However, this begs a more important question: When can (should) certain specific topics be taught? While it may be true that

practically any concept can be taught in some form to even the youngest pupil, is it efficient to do so? If the same material can be grasped more swiftly and with greater understanding by older children, what is the point of pushing it down into the primary grades?

For years the elementary grade social studies was constructed upon certain assumptions regarding children's development. It was thought that instruction should begin with the environment closest to the child and expand outward to treat more remote topics, institutions, and cultures as the child progressed through the grades. Recently, the "expanding environment" approach has been severely criticized, but no convincing formula has been found to replace it. The simple fact is that in the elementary grades there is no compelling point of view to guide the selection of content.* These questions require answers by the Commission:

1. What are children able to learn efficiently in the primary grades?
2. What do they need to learn in the primary grades so that later instruction can take advantage of their knowledge and skills?
3. Is it important that social studies be treated as a separate portion of the curriculum in the primary grades or can social studies content and skills be accommodated in other ways in the primary school curriculum?

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*Secretary William Bennett is one who despises the expanding environments approach and urges a return to the dominated elementary school history curriculum that preceded the 1916 Commission.

In the upper grades, especially in the secondary school, other sequence questions emerge. Currently, the secondary school curriculum is organized according to Carnegie units: defined as 120 hours in a subject -- meeting 4 or 5 times a week for 40 to 60 minutes for 36-40 weeks per year. A student is judged to have completed a course when he has completed a "Carnegie unit." Perhaps, it is time to challenge the influence this accounting device has had on the curriculum. Is it truly important for students to meet each of their academic courses every day? Is it not possible that this contributes to boredom by students and repetitious instruction by teachers? Students in other countries take more courses than American students because they don't attend each class every day. Suppose that American history were taught sequentially over a three-year period, say grades 8-10 without repeating topics while moving forward chronologically; and suppose that classes met only two or three times each week. If this pattern were adopted, American history could be taught at the same time students were also studying world history, American government, or geography. Thus, a sequence for grades 7-12 might be:

Grade 7	Geography
Grades 8-9-10	American history and world history. Each course studied over a three-year period but not meeting each day. During the tenth grade the chronological period covered by the American history and the world history course would be identical.

Grade 11	American government and economics. These two courses could be offered on alternate days throughout the year or offered as separate semester courses.
Grade 12	American problems and an elective course. These courses could also be offered on one-semester bases or on alternate days throughout the year.

Possibly homework would improve if students had more time to prepare between classes; maybe students would link content across courses; perhaps the artificial barriers between academic disciplines would be slightly more permeable; maybe the result would be greater integration of subject matters.

How should social studies be taught?

The dominant pedagogical approach used in teaching social studies is teacher-directed recitation. The pattern is repeated over and again, regardless of level of instruction: Teacher assigns reading from a textbook; students complete the reading; teacher poses questions to determine if students understood the reading assignment. Some teachers ask their students to write answers to questions that cover the reading; some teachers intersperse the recitation with anecdotes and information that extend the textbook treatment; occasionally issues are framed that provoke lively discussion. But nearly everywhere it is the same: directed discussion is the method for teaching social studies.

It is not surprising that social studies is among the most boring subjects for students. Nor is it surprising that an approach to teaching that requires each student to be alert for only a few minutes per period results

in so little knowledge retention. We know -- and teachers know -- that telling is not teaching and listening is not learning. Why does teacher-directed recitation prevail?

Recitation is used mainly because it is the easiest way to teach; every other way requires more time, more energy, and a greater range of materials than teachers have available. So long as high school teachers must teach five or six classes with as many as three different preparations each day, they must employ methods that require little or no preparation. Teachers can review the reading assignment as students read it in class; they use questions to test understanding and to maintain classroom discipline by directing questions at those students who have become restless, are talking to neighbors, or are day dreaming. It takes time to prepare a good lecture, to select, preview, and arrange for an appropriate audio-visual presentation, to organize a debate, to write a simulation, or to conduct a field trip. Time is a luxury; few teachers have enough of it.

Textbooks support recitation practices. They are largely organized so as to support three-page reading assignments, complete with questions. Nearly all students have textbooks of their own; schools provide little else for instructional purposes. Covering the content of a textbook in a year gives the illusion that what was covered was learned. Tests provided by the textbook publisher confirm that most -- if not all -- students did learn what was read (at least until the test).

Teacher-directed recitation is also easy for students. Students are accustomed to it; it does not make them work or think too hard. Good students are proficient at memorizing information for tests; they are skilled at playing the recitation game in class.

Recitation survives because it works within the culture that exists. If the pedagogy is to be altered, drastic changes will be required. First, new kinds of instructional materials are needed. Only about .5% of a typical school budget is devoted to the purchase of instructional materials -- mainly textbooks. To teach differently, teachers require a wider range of teaching materials and much better school libraries. Primary documents, paperbacks, biographies, simulations, interactive video disks, compilations of data: These and other kinds of products are needed if teachers are to perform differently; few teachers have what they need.

Teachers also need more time. The preparation time for a good lesson is at least one hour of preparation for one hour of instruction; often the proportion is 2-1 or even 3-1. If teachers are provided more time during the school day to prepare for their classes, we will need more teachers with fewer class assignments per teacher, or we must restructure the way teaching is done -- providing for team teaching, using technology and teacher aides in creative ways, etc.

The main point is that good teaching costs money, and only a portion of the greater cost can be assigned to teacher salaries. The Commission must address this point because all of its other recommendations will prove

fruitless unless ways can be found to improve the resources available to teachers.

It should be understood that the Commission has no right or ability to direct teachers to teach in one way or another. Indeed, the Commission should come down firmly on the side of urging that teachers be given greater freedom than many have currently in deciding the topics to be covered within a course, in selecting their own textbooks and other teaching materials, and in choosing their own approaches to teaching. At the same time the Commission should point to the poverty in teaching approach that currently exists, expose why social studies teaching is so constrained, and urge policies that will enable teachers to overcome existing barriers in order to perform in ways they would prefer.

Summary

I have indicated why the National Commission for the Social Studies provides the best opportunity in memory -- and likely the best for the remainder of this century -- to improve social studies in American schools. I have also identified a few of the issues the Commission must confront. Other issues also deserve attention; they include: 1) the pre-service and in-service education of teachers; 2) the responsibility academic disciplines share in helping identify main themes, topics, concepts, and generalizations that should be understood by everyone; 3) the importance of providing students with opportunities to apply their knowledge to "real-life"

experiences within the school and community. There has been no time to treat these and other issues, but they are equally important.

What seems clear to me is that after years of complaints, limited experiments, and proselytizing by special interests, social studies has an extraordinary opportunity to reconsider its mission and move in new directions. It should not squander this opportunity. Like Halley's comet, it may not return for 76 years.